

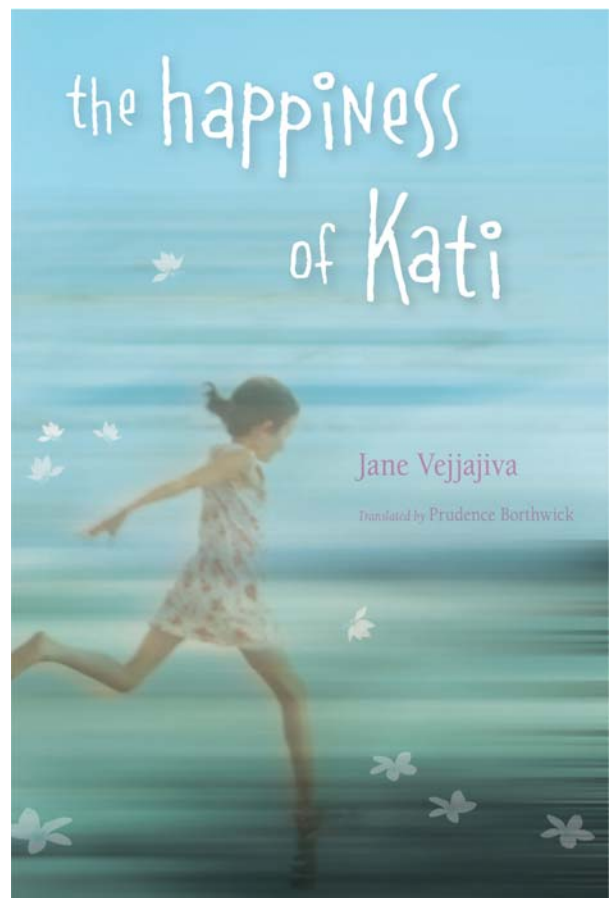
# Teachers Notes (Middle Years) by Dr Wendy Michaels

# The Happiness of Kati Jane Vejjajiva

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Recommended for ages 8-11

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

This book has been a bestseller in Thailand and has been selected as one of the five most cherished books by celebrities and critics in Thailand. It has also been published in the US, France, Germany and Japan. While the story is about a nine-year-old Thai girl, it has a wide appeal since its themes have universal application to other cultures. It is a poignant and moving novel that gives a fascinating insight into contemporary daily life in Thailand, an exotic world with jellyfish and wind crabs, peacock flowers and frangipani, and hot spicy food. It also has resonances beyond that exotic setting since the protagonist, Kati, is a strong, memorable character and her family situation has appeal to child and adult readers alike. The lyrical writing in this book lends itself to reading aloud. It is an ideal novel for the classroom because it raises important moral issues, offering students significant relating to their own lives.

### **PLOT SUMMARY**

Nine-year-old Kati leaves the security of her grandparents' rural home by the river on a journey to resolve the mystery she has grown up with – the absence of her beloved and loving mother. Kati's longed-for reunion with her mother and her enjoyment of the delights of the wider world of the seaside and the city are complicated by her mother's degenerative illness. As Kati comes to terms with her mother's illness and death, she grows in her understanding of the complexities of life and adult relationships, including her parents' love affair and eventual separation. Through these difficult experiences, Kati learns to face life with the confidence of being loved, helped by her lively interest in the people and places that surround her.

## **BEFORE READING THE BOOK**

- Have students research the country of Thailand. You could divide students into groups and have each group focus on a particular aspect such as geographical features (esp. rivers), cities, language and customs, food and cooking, religion (particularly Buddhism and its rituals), plants and animals and so on. Encourage them to collect images and information and allow time for sharing and display of their research.
- Explain to the students that you are going to read a story about a young Thai girl who lives in a traditional Thai house on the *klong* with her grandparents. In the story, Kati also spends time in a family apartment in the city of Bangkok and a holiday bungalow by the seaside. Encourage students to explore these different settings in contemporary Thailand. Travel brochures might provide a useful source of images and information about both traditional Thailand and the modern aspects of cities such as Bangkok.
- Point out that Kati, the main character in the story, lives with her grandparents. Ask them to speculate as to why a young Thai girl might be living with her grandparents. Where might her parents be? You could ask whether they know of other situations where a young girl or boy might be living with grandparents rather than parents.

## WHILE READING THE BOOK

### PART ONE: THE HOME ON THE WATER

- Read the chapters in Part One to the students and show them the illustrations that accompany the first section of the story. Explain that this part introduces Kati, her grandmother and grandfather, and her daily life at home and school.
  - Encourage them to discuss their first impressions of Kati and her life on the water.
  - Encourage them to make connections between their research and the information provided in the novel.
  - Encourage students to think about the ways in which Kati's life is similar to or different from their own.
- How do the illustrations help to establish the setting of the story? Divide the class into groups and allocate each group one of the chapters of this section. Tell students that they are to imagine that this story is going to be made into a film. Their task is to develop a storyboard that shows the frame-by-frame action of each chapter. Allow time for the students to develop their storyboard and for sharing it with the rest of the class.
- Ask students to imagine that they have been commissioned by the film-maker to provide a full-colour poster for the film. Encourage them to draw on the images that they collected in their research to help them make their posters. Tell them that the film-maker wants the poster to communicate the feeling of the setting and establish Kati as the main character. Allow time for the development of their posters. Display some of the finished posters and encourage discussion of the different ways in which students have represented the setting and character.
- The first section shows Kati's relationship with her grandparents. Encourage students to discuss how Kati sees her grandparents. There is also a mystery about the grandmother's previous job. Ask students to think about what this mystery might be. The narrator also establishes a joking relationship between the grandparents that Kati is aware of.
- Ask students to imagine that they are Kati and write diary entries about their feelings about Grandma and Grandpa and life with them. You might want to re-read selected sections to highlight how the story presents Kati's life. Allow time for students to write their diary entries and then share them with the rest of the class and discuss the ways they see Kati and her life.
- Ask students to think about their own grandparents and the relationships that they have with them. What objects do they associate with their grandparents? Have students write a story about their grandparents. You could encourage them to write a "true" story or to fictionalize an event that has happened to them and their grandparents, or to make up a story that might happen or that they wish might happen. Encourage them to present their grandparents in a lively way as the narrator does in Kati's story.

- Ask students to notice how the narrative makes reference to the mother through the sub-heading of each chapter. You might like to write these sub-headings on the board or on chart paper:

*Mother never promised to return. Kati waited every day for Mother. In the house there were no photos of Mother. No-one ever spoke of Mother. Kati no longer remembered Mother's face. Kati wanted Mother to pick her up from school sometimes. Kati wanted to see Mother carrying the shopping home from market. Kati wondered if Mother ever thought of her. It was only Mother's voice that Kati could remember well.*

- Encourage students to discuss this mystery. What do they think is suggested by these sentences? Invite them to speculate as to where Kati's mother might be. Remind them that the section does end with the grandmother asking Kati if she would like to go and see her mother – so it is clear that the mother is alive somewhere. Why do they think there is no mention of her father?

## **PART TWO: THE HOME BY THE SEA**

Before reading Part Two of the story, point out that the story now changes location and introduces some other members of the family – as well as Kati's mother. You might need to explain about the degenerative disease that the mother is suffering from and that the narrator allows us to hear the mother's story and learn a little about Kati's father.

- As you read the chapters encourage students to discuss their responses to this part of the story – particularly the introduction and death of the mother. Draw their attention to the way in which the various members of the family come together and support each other in this difficult situation. How does this affect Kati? How might they respond if they were Kati in this situation of loss?
- Point out the title of the book – *The Happiness of Kati* – and ask students why they think the author might have chosen that title for a book in which the main character loses her mother to a degenerative disease. You could remind students that the author also suffers from cerebral palsy. Provide them with her explanation of the idea of happiness:

*When I was young I used to cry a lot and one day I just stopped crying and seemed to be joyful. Looking back I remembered being in a 'tunnel'. Everything was dark until one day there was sunlight shining through. I had to learn practically everything from button[ing] my shirt to walking with canes so it was not fun. I [guess] that once I learnt my limitation and figured out where the boundary of my ability was, I grew to accept it and in time lived with it. I came to realise that I could excel in many things and of course I had my whole family with me. I probably made a choice that I wanted to make the best of my life from what I had and to be happy! So in a way, I chose to be happy and that was what I put in my book.*

- The author also says: *even if your life is not perfect you can make the best of it and choose to be happy*. Ask students to debate this proposition. Encourage them to think whether they agree or not and to find evidence to support their argument for or against. The evidence could come from books, films or real life experiences.
- Ask students to predict how Kati might “choose to be happy”.
- You might re-read the last two sections and ask students to imagine how the characters’ Buddhist beliefs help them to deal with the grief of their loss.
- Point out the names given to each chapter in this part of the story: *Peacock Flowers, Wind Crabs, Sea Morning Glories, Jellyfish, Frangipani, Sandflies, Sea Pines, Cicadas, Leadworts*. The author says that she began writing this story by taking insignificant items and writing a chapter about them and then weaving them together to make connections that created the bigger picture of the story.
  - Encourage students to identify the connections between each of these items and the bigger picture.
  - Have students select two or three of these items and use them as the stimulus for a story of their own. Allow time for writing and sharing their stories.
- Re-read the section where Kati is reunited with her mother (p. 35) and have students compare this with the mother’s death (p.70). What does Kati learn from this situation?
- As Kati learns about the history of her family she is shown photographs. This is a useful device that writers use to introduce the “back-story” of various characters.
  - Have students bring in from home some old family photographs. Encourage them to talk about the people in the photographs and the events that brought them together.
  - Have students use one of the photographs to tell a story that starts with the sentence: “The past casts a shadow that can point to the future.” Allow time for writing the stories and sharing them with the class.
- Re-read the final section (p.76) and draw students’ attention to the final statement: “As for Kati, she would journey on to find the missing piece in the puzzle of her life.” Have students work with a partner to discuss what Kati might do to find that missing piece of the puzzle. Allow time for students to compare their predictions.

### **PART THREE: THE HOME IN THE CITY**

This part of the story moves to the city and the apartment block as Kati is faced with the possibility of making contact with her father.

- Invite students to predict what Kati might do in this part of the story. Encourage them to justify their predictions based on what they have learned in the previous sections of the story. Encourage them to think what they would do if they were Kati.

When reading Part Three, encourage students to predict what will happen in each chapter before reading it. With Kati, we now learn more about her mother's life and the focus of the mystery shifts to Kati's father.

- Encourage the students to speculate as to whether Kati will make contact with her father. Encourage them to use evidence from the story to support their predictions.
- Point out Uncle Dong's comment (p.90): "Sometimes destiny plays such strange tricks on us humans". Ask students to talk about their responses to this comment.
- Point out the narrator's comment (p.91): "Kati could not imagine what made two people decide to be together or what made them decide to break up." Ask students to speculate as to why the narrator makes this comment to the reader. Invite them to give their opinions about what makes people stay together or break up.
- Reread the section that describes Pinkie's "work of art" and Kati's response to it (p.97-98). Have students make a version of the drawing that Pinkie has made and then one of the drawing that Kati would make if she had the pencils in her hand. Encourage them to discuss the differences in the two girls' feelings about their families. How do they account for these differences?
- Reread the chapter, "Postbox". Point out that the narrator tells us that "only the postbox knew her secret". Ask students to speculate as to what that secret is. Ask them to write the letter that they think Kati has posted. Is it the letter that her mother wrote to her father? Or, has Kati written to someone herself?
- Reread the final chapter of this section. Point out the final words: "Looking forward was the best thing to do". Ask students what they think Kati is particularly looking forward to. You might need to remind them of the reference to Tong. Ask them to think back to the earlier parts of the story where he was mentioned. Encourage them to think about the friendship that Kati shares with him.
- Tell students that there is an epilogue to this story. You might need to explain that an epilogue is a short addition to a story that is like a coda in which all the loose ends are tied up.
  - Ask the students to identify the loose ends that need to be tied up in this story.
  - Have students write the epilogue that they think would complete this story. Allow time for writing and sharing their writing. Read the epilogue to the students and invite them to compare theirs with the author's version.
- Provide students with a copy of the postcard (p.112). Encourage them to think about the letter that Kati wrote to Tong. What do they think was in that letter? Have students write their version of Kati's letter.

- Point out the narrator’s comment (p.113): “That day Kati had sent a letter overseas but it had been the letter to Tong. This had saved Kati from having to explain to Uncle Dong and Uncle Kunn and Aunt Da what she had decided and why.”
  - Encourage students to discuss why Kati decided to do this. Have students imagine that they are Kati and have them write in their diaries about this decision.

## **AFTER READING THE BOOK**

- Ask students to think back over Kati’s journey. Encourage them to talk about how Kati's experiences have affected her.
- Have students reread the opening chapter of the book and talk about how Kati is depicted in this chapter and compare it with the closing paragraphs of the epilogue.
- Ask students to write the next chapter in Kati’s life story.

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **JANE VEJAJIVA**

Jane Vejajiva was born in 1963 in London, UK, where her parents completed their medical studies. She moved to Thailand at the age of 3. She was not able to speak a word of Thai initially but soon she forgot English as she grew up in Bangkok. Jane was born with cerebral palsy that limits her movements. She discovered books when she spent some time in a hospital and she read all the great classics of English children’s literature. For her, books became very important because they opened up imaginary worlds.

Jane is skilled in languages and graduated with first class honours in her Bachelor of Arts from Thammasat University, Bangkok, where she studied French and Italian. She then furthered her studies at Translators and Interpreters School (French, English and Italian) in Brussels, Belgium. She started her career as a translator with a magazine publisher in 1988 before setting up her own company publishing and editing a magazine for children until 1995. She is now running a copyright agency, Silkroad Publishers Agency, the first agency owned by a Thai, and she also works as a freelance translator. Her translations include *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling, *Seta* by Alessandro Baricco, *Le moine et le philosophe* by Jean-François Revel & Mathieu Ricard, and *The Trumpet of the Swan* by E. B. White. In 1999, she was decorated Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the Ministry of Culture of France. *The Happiness of Kati* is her first novel and was first published by Preaw Juvenile Books, an imprint of Amarin Printing and Publishing, in December 2003.

## **PRUDENCE BORTHWICK**

Prudence Borthwick is an Australian who recently won second place in the John Dryden Translation Competition organised by the University of East Anglia (UK). Her deep acquaintance with Thai culture and appreciation of its subtleties has resulted in her conveying the local colour with such delicious accuracy. She says about the book:

*The Happiness of Kati is destined to be a classic of children's literature. Coming from Thailand, Kati brings a fresh perspective to fiction for younger readers, and recalls antecedents as diverse as Harriet the Spy and The Secret Garden. Like the child detective in Harriet the Spy, Kati's keen observation and appreciation of detail follows a trail of clues that ultimately solve the mystery of her identity. The other genre into which this book nearly fits is children's romantic fiction. In the children's classic, The Secret Garden, Mary unlocks the secret garden and Colin comes to understand his grief stricken and absent father; in The Happiness of Kati, Kati is reunited with her long lost mother under tragic circumstances and discovers the truth about her parents. However, this romantic fiction ends with a modern twist in which Kati becomes the agent of her own (unconventional) happy ending.*

## **DR WENDY MICHAELS**

Dr Wendy Michaels is a former lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Newcastle on the Ourimbah Campus. She taught courses in Children's Literature, Creative Writing, Gender Studies and Education. Her research interests are in emerging genres in young adult fiction, representations of gender in children's literature, interanimation of word and image in picture books and writing for performance.

Dr Michaels was also an English teacher and English Inspector at the NSW Board of Studies. She has published a number of books for students and teachers and has written teachers notes for Allen & Unwin on *Jinx*, *A Step from Heaven*, *Parvana*, *And what about Anna*, *Njunjul the Sun*, *Pankration*, *Wolf on the Fold*, *Guitar Highway Rose*, *By the River*, *The Glory Garage* and *Australia Locked Up*. Her own published writing for children includes the genres of poetry, drama script, prose fiction and the picture book, *Secret Smiles*.